

September 13, 2015

TEXT: Exodus 3:11–15

TITLE: Re-Confirmation Class, Lesson #1: God

Welcome to Re-Confirmation Class! Confirmation classes are classes offered to young people usually around 8th or 9th grade in which they study the core beliefs of Christianity prior to joining a church. Our church's confirmation classes will begin next month. But far too often adult Christian faith is entirely based on what was learned as a child in Sunday School or perhaps remembered from a few confirmation classes attended as a teenager. So you are all now enrolled in Re-Confirmation Classes, which over the next five weeks will look at God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and Heaven and Hell. Welcome to Lesson #1: God.

When you want to learn about God, lots of people can be your guide. We can learn from St. Augustine who was finally convinced of the truth of the Christian faith, from St. Francis who saw an ecstatic vision that changed his life completely or from Mother Teresa who made a commitment to serve the God reflected in the faces of untouchables in Calcutta. But for today, I'm going to share part of the story of a British scientist named John Polkinghorne. I'm also going to give you an initial instruction that is far more important than you likely realize. The instruction is this: *Come, walk with me as we talk about God.*

Imagine we are strolling together with a physicist named John Polkinghorne who spent over 25 years studying elementary particles like quarks and gluons. When he turned 50, Polkinghorne reflected on his life and decided he would leave his Cambridge professorship and become ordained as a minister in the Church of England. This wasn't a huge change. He had always stood within the community of faith and Christianity had always been central to his life. Yet when his colleagues found out about this decision, for a number of them, the question they asked was not why he was seeking ordination, but rather why he believed in God at all.

When Polkinghorne tried to answer them, it became clear that the conversation would be too involved to be conveniently discussed in a half-hour chat over coffee. So Polkinghorne wrote several short books telling why he believes in God, in Jesus Christ, and in the authority of Christianity. But the summary of how he answered his friends' questions is this: *Faith in God & Christianity offers a coherent frame-work that holds up when we seek to understand the perplexing way the world is.*¹

Now, that is a scientist talking. A mystic, a social worker, an artist will give you a different summary or describe a different path you can follow to God. But for now, let us keep walking and consider how belief in a Creator God best provides a coherent framework when seeking to answer the hard questions of life. As we walk with Dr. Polkinghorne, the first surprising fact this physicist points out to us is that the world around us is intelligible. We understand that water evaporates

and becomes vapor up in the clouds until it cools and falls back to earth again as precipitation. Likewise, gravity causes apples to fall from trees as well as holds planets in their orbits around the sun. As simple as that all sounds, Einstein himself once said, “The only incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.” The structures of life are surprisingly intelligible. Life has an order to it that we can understand. Ours may be an imperfect knowledge, as if seeing in a mirror dimly, but the capacity is there.

Secondly, our experiences of life evoke in us a sense of wonder and awe. Wonder drives us to admire the starry skies and compels astronomers to try and identify other life-supporting planets beyond our galaxy. Most scientists endure long hours of work for the pay-off that comes when their research provides an elegant solution to a timeless problem. In fact, economy and elegance are qualities scientists look for when proposing theories about life on earth. So the kindred spirit that unites scientist and believers when they gaze upon the world in wonder is something deeper than just coincidence.

Now, this sense of wonder does not, in and of itself, prove that God exists. But if you accept that the world is intelligible, and that there is a fundamental beauty and awesomeness to the mystery that human life exists here on Earth, then you are moving in the right direction to consider other important questions. For example, this world is not only a place of aesthetic beauty; it is also a place of moral beauty—of universal senses of right and wrong. We know intuitively that torturing a child is wrong. Why is that? Is it simply an evolutionary by-product designed to help ensure our species survives? Or is it tied to a deeper plan of life that has made us to be both physical and moral creatures on this planet? In a similar way, there are times when our experiences of awe have a transcendent, spiritual quality to them. There are moments when we feel connected to something that is holy, that is Other, that moves us beyond flesh and blood reality into a deeper, truer dimension of life. Is this simply a psychological by-product of human consciousness or is it a part of a spiritual quality of life, something as real as science and matter? I believe that thinking about life’s order, life’s beauty, life’s moral and spiritual qualities are all questions that help us arrive at a “Yes” answer to the question “Does God exist?”

Given all this, it’s time now to bring up the “Moses Paradigm.” As the story goes, Moses encountered God speaking to him from a bush that burnt without being consumed. Moses’ first question to God was “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” Who am I that I should do these things you ask of me? From Moses’ example we learn that every question about God actually starts with a question about ourselves.

If this sermon were intended to be a lecture about God, I could have started with giving you a list of adjectives to describe God, like the list from the Westminster Catechism I included at the top of the bulletin. I could define God as Spirit, infinite in being, glory, omnipresent, almighty, most just and most gracious. But those

words only take their meaning from us—from our experience of being some lesser version of all these things. So we first ask about who we are, human beings, creatures capable of contemplating the wonder of the starry heavens above and the moral law within (Immanuel Kant). From there we move on to ask about God. We ask “Does God exist? And if so, does God interact with us and seek to be in relationship with us? That’s precisely the path that Moses followed when he moved from “Who am I?” to asking God “Who are you? What is your name?”

The answer God told Moses is a difficult phrase to translate from Hebrew into English. The three word phrase is “ehyeh asher ehyeh” and can be translated in both present and future tenses: “I am who I am”, “I am who I will be”, and “I will be who I will be.” All three are true. In a world of change and uncertainty, Yahweh says “I am who I am” —a consistent God. In a world of upheaval and fickleness, Yahweh says “I am who I will be” —a steadfast God. In a world that moves quickly toward unknown and likely uncomfortable futures, Yahweh says “I will be who I will be” —a trustworthy, ever-present God. By answering Moses’ question and offering a name, God fully entered into our history. God entered into the community of human beings, a God with a name among people who identify themselves by names. God took the initiative and entered into relationship with us. Now we are not only creatures who look at the universe and wonder about our place in it; we are also creatures in relation with our Creator, who has been and who is and who will be. Our personal question “Who am I?” has now been expanded to include God as part of the answer.

I just finished a novel by the African American author Octavia Butler called “The Parable of the Sower.” In it, one wise young woman is asked, “How did you get your ideas about God?” To which she replied, “I was looking for God. I wasn’t looking for mythology or mysticism or magic. I didn’t know whether there was a god to find but I wanted to know.”² Do you know why I have been emphasizing that you should imagine today’s sermon as a conversation we share as we walk together? I’ve done this because no one can ask “Does God exist?” from a seated, passive posture—from a skeptical, “convince me with your religious talk” perspective. You need to look for God. You need to move and consider your life from all angles; you need to move and consider this world with wonder and humility; and you need to move and ask whether any theory about human life that does not include God can rationally hold together. I would argue that an atheist position is rationally absurd.³ Atheism is incomplete when confronting the wonder of life and inflexible when considering the mystery of life, and therefore, similar to Polkinghorne’s conclusion, it does not offer a coherent framework for understanding the world.

I know our little walk and talk today didn’t go far enough. There’s much more to say about God—a God who exists, who exists in this historical reality and who is in relationship with us. We’ll say more next week when our Re-Confirmation Class talks about Jesus. But for now do your homework. Look at yourself and

then look for God. Consider the ways God's name has been shared with you. And realize that not only does God exist, but now, in a real way, you finally, fully exist. AMEN.

¹ Cf. John Polkinghorne, The Way the World Is: The Christian Perspective of a Scientist, Westminster John Knox Press, 1983/2007; Serious Talk: Science and Religion in Dialogue, Trinity Press International, 1995.

² Octavia Butler, The Parable of the Sower, 1993, p. 217.

³ Cf. Blaise Pascal, "There is a sense in which the basic tenets of faith - God, the union of mind and body, original sin - are absurd and yet the world image which excludes those tenets is even more absurd." Quoted in Leszek Kolakowski, Religion.